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## ABSTRACT

Three major items to which teachers of U.S. history survey courses in 2- and 4-year colleges and universities must attend are discussed. First, they must work to develop in their students basic learning and study skills and self-discipline. This means such mundane but essential things as adhering to course deadlines, maintaining grading standards, and seeing that students take remedial or developmental courses if needed. Second, teachers must require meaningful amounts of reading and writing in their courses. In a recent survey, the Texas Advisory Council for Technical-Vocational Education cited an "incomplete and/or poorly filled out job application form" as the third major reason for rejecting job applicants. The employer survey also cited the "ability to write and speak effectively" as the number one area needing improvement among job applicants. Lastly, teachers must show students that constructive change is possible since many students believe that the national and world situation is hopeless. Students should be exposed to the many examples in history which show how people have brought about change. (RM)

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# The U.S. Survey in the Two-Year College

William F. Mugleston

Our purpose this morning is to examine the state of the US survey course in higher education - at the two-year, four-year and university levels. I teach at a large urban community college, of some 5500 students. We have the rather typical student body for colleges of our type: the majority of our students hold full- or part-time jobs; many are married with families; all are commuter students; about half attend at night; many are the first generation in their families to attend college. For many of them, college is only one of several competing demands on their time. Their average age is 26. We are about 20% black and 7% Hispanic.

Like most history teachers, I was raised on the traditional lecture-discussion method in undergraduate and graduate school and saw little reason to change when I began teaching in the late 60s.

However, my school, like many, went through the self-pacing phase. Well-meaning administrators attracted to the latest fad in higher education mandated that self-paced sections of certain courses would be offered, and I found myself developing and teaching such sections of our colonial through Reconstruction survey.

My course involved 12 unit exams plus a final, three mandatory class meetings early in the semester, and periodic individual conferences with students thereafter. I concluded that only a certain breed of student can succeed in such a course: those who are highly motivated to learn, those who can work well on their own with relatively little guidance, and those who have a considerable amount of

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self-discipline. For these students, and I did have some, the course was highly satisfying.

Unfortunately, though, most of our students do not fit this description. As I have said, for many of them college is only a part-time commitment competing with other priorities in their lives. Many of them have weak study skills. Especially if they are recent high school graduates, their reading and writing skills tend to be, to put it charitably, dreadful. Self-discipline is a concept unknown to many of them, at least as it relates to college. The recent high school graduates have come from an environment where, most likely, they took five or six courses, were challenged little if at all, and were routinely passed on to the next grade. They come to college believing they can also take and pass four or five courses with as little effort as in high school, plus of course work 20-30 hours a week. By the end of the first semester, the truth begins to sink in for some of them.

None of this is a surprise to those of us who have been in higher education for any length of time. None of us was shocked by the spate of recent national attention directed to the weaknesses of our educational system. For most of us, the reaction was probably something like "We've known this for years" or "It's about time the rest of the citizenry learned these things."

Now it is 1984. Where do we go from here? At my school the emphasis is no longer on self-pacing, although we have not entirely abandoned the concept. I submit that we who teach history have a different obligation and agenda before us. I would list three major items:

1) We must work to develop in our students basic learning and study skills and self-discipline, since the high schools apparently have dropped the ball here. This means such mundane but essential things as adhering to deadlines in a course, maintaining grading standards, and seeing to it that our students take remedial or developmental course if needed. I am pleased at the trend in my school and others to institute academic assessment of entering students and place them in appropriate English, math, and study skills courses. Incidentally, we can also devote a little time in our own courses to study skills essential in studying history.

2) We must require meaningful amounts of reading and writing in our courses. History teachers who require no writing from their students are looking out for their own comfort, and not for the welfare of their students. Five years ago Dick Cavett told a graduating class at The Johns Hopkins University:

I can imagine your saying to yourself..."I'm sorry the language is ailing but there's nothing I can do. It doesn't affect me anyway, since that's not my field. I can still get through the day. I can always get my meaning across..." I am here this afternoon to say it does affect you, and there is something you can do. No matter what you majored in, you're still English majors. We're all English majors whether we like it or not.

To paraphrase Mr. Cavett, I would say "We're all English teachers whether we like it or not."

Last year the Advisory Council for Technical-Vocational Education in Texas surveyed 1100 employers, who were asked to rate the importance of education, training, attitudes, grooming, etc. to the acceptance or rejection of job applicants. The second and third most cited reasons for rejecting job applicants were "lack of job-

related skills/education" and an "incomplete and/or poorly filled out job application form." When you get back to your classes, ask your students when was the last time they filled out a job application form that had multiple-choice questions. The employers surveyed also cited the "ability to write and speak effectively" as the number one area needing improvement among job applicants. This item was not even among the top five in a similar survey eight years before. If we keep in mind that many of our students are aiming for full-time entry-level employment as soon as they complete two or four years of college, it becomes clear that we as their educators have our work cut out for us. I believe history is particularly suited to developing the reading and writing skills our students will need. History is blessedly jargon-free, unlike many of the other social sciences. While no history textbook will ever win a Pulitzer Prize, we can require our students to read some of the more felicitously written books and essays which have graced our profession. The reading of history for pleasure by the general public remains high, as Bruce Catton, Barbara Tuchman, and David McCullough, to name just three, have proven. I believe exposure to good writing can rub off on our students. Indeed, I encourage them to read anything--magazines, newspapers, books of any kind--just to develop the reading habit. Unfortunately, many of our students in the two-year colleges come from homes where reading is the exception, not the rule.

3) Lastly, I see in my students too often a resignation that the national and world situation is hopeless and there's nothing anyone can do about it. I am depressed to see such passivity in 18-year-olds. Many of them are from lower socio-economic rungs of

the ladder and struggling to get by economically. Such people sometimes feel that others higher up are running things and that there is little they can do to effect change. Most depressing, I have had some students tell me they do not expect to live to the age of 50--they will die in a nuclear war first.

A theme that runs through my courses is that history is a study of how people bring about change and react to change. Change is inevitable in all of our lives--how well we cope with it determines to no small degree, I believe, how we manage both individually and collectively as a society. I believe history shows again and again that constructive change is possible. In the United States, progressive reformers of the early twentieth century showed that the working class could improve its condition. The massive shift in public opinion over the Vietnam war surely had something to do with getting us out of that unhappy conflict. The civil rights movement is an eloquent testimony to those who sought change for the better. History of course has its grim side too--and we must show this in our teaching. Basically, history shows the processes of societies coping and changing. It's the same for individuals. How well each of us handles the challenges and changes in our lives determines the state of our own mental health. I think history can provide some guidance in this regard.

To conclude, I am upbeat and hopeful about my students, despite my negative comments about their skills. They are nice people--I haven't met one I don't like personally. They are well-meaning and sincere. I'm sure at 18 I had some of the same weaknesses I now criticize in them. Some of them are incredibly hard-working and determined to make it. As history teachers, I think we can help them.